The Letter of the Prophet to the Emperor of Byzantium

رسالة النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم إلى إمبراطور بيزنطة

[English - إنجليزي]

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An Introduction

Organization of the Article



This article consists of a first part which is the background and context of the two stories that are told in the second and third part. The main story is the narration of Abu Sufyan ibn Harb to Abdullah ibn Abbas concerning his meeting with Heraclius in Jerusalem, recorded in the collection of Saheeh al-Bukhari. Appended to this narration is another, whose source was the Governor of Jerusalem, ibn al-Natur. From the events recorded in each story, it seems obvious that the invitation to Islam by Heraclius to his people in Homs happened at a later date than the meeting of Abu Sufyan with him in Jerusalem. However, it also seems clear that Heraclius must have called for Abu Sufyan after he had heard news of the Prophet in Arabia. Moreover, it is without doubt that when Abu Sufyan met Heraclius, the latter was in possession of the letter from the Prophet. Thus I have split the narration of ibn al-Natur into two episodes which coincidentally occurred in two different locations. The first episode took place in Jerusalem, before the meeting of Abu Sufyan with Heraclius there.

while the second in Homs, after Heraclius left Jerusalem. I have also placed the split narration before and after Abu Sufyan's story. Both stories were narrated by ibn Abbas.

Abu Sufyan ibn Harb

Although Abu Sufyan was to eventually embrace Islam, for most of his career during the life of the Prophet, he was bitterly opposed to it. He was the leader of the Umayyad clan of the Quraish tribe and was the chieftain of the entire Quraish tribe, making him one of the most powerful men in Mecca during the lifetime of Muhammad. His great-grand father was Abdul Shams ibn Abd al-Manaf, whose brother was Hashim, the great-grandfather of Muhammad, so there was a distant cousin relationship between them. It was Abu Sufyan's position that made him an enemy of Muhammad, whom he viewed as a threat to his power and a blasphemer of the Quraish gods. The enmity between the Quraish, of whom Abu Sufyan was a prominent leader, and the early Muslims reached such heights that many battles were fought between the two parties after the Muslims settled in Medina in which he participated, and it was he who led the army of Quraish in the Battle of Uhud in 625CE. After the Treaty of Hudaybiyya in 628CE, he took a trading caravan to Greater Syria, and was called to Caesar in Jerusalem. Meanwhile, the treaty with Muhammad was broken by allies of the Quraish while Abu Sufyan was on the way back to Mecca. Knowing the Muslims were now free from the treaty made a year and a half earlier, he personally went to Medina to try and patch it up, but came away empty handed. The Muslims subsequently attacked Mecca in 630CE. Seeing the writing on the wall, Abu Sufyan fled the city, but later returned in order to embrace Islam.

The Prophet and the Emperor

The Prophet Muhammad and the Emperor Heraclius were contemporaries. Born only 5 years apart, they both lived into their sixties. The reign of Heraclius was marked by ups and downs in military success. In 609CE, when he was 40, Muhammad received the first revelations that marked the beginning of his prophetic mission. In 610CE Heraclius deposed Procus as Emperor and took his place, but the beginning of his reign was marked by the defeat of his armies in Palestine and Turkey between 614 and 619CE.[1] These defeats, and the subsequent victory the Romans would enjoy, were mentioned in the Quran at the time:

"The Romans have been defeated in the nearer land; and they, after their defeat, will be victorious. Within three to nine years." (Quran 30:2-4)

The reconquest by the Romans of the lands ceded to Khosrau started in 625 and ended in triumph in 627CE. The following year, Muhammad, may Allah praise him, sent the following letter to Heraclius by the hand of Dihya al-Kalbi, by way of the governor of Bostra al-Sham, in Syria.

The Letter

The letter Muhammad sent is incorporated in the narration of Abu Sufyan, and I reproduce it below word for word as Heraclius read it out before all his Grandees.

In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful.

This letter is from Muhammad the slave of God and His Messenger to Heraclius, the ruler of the Byzantines.

Peace be upon him who follows the right path.

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1 **Heraclius**. (2006). In Encyclopædia Britannica. Retrieved August 22, 2006, from Encyclopædia Britannica Premium Service.

I am writing this invitation to call you to Islam.[2] If you become a Muslim you will be safe - and God will double your reward, but if you reject this invitation of Islam you will bear the sin of having misguided your subjects[3]. Thus do I urge you to heed the following:

"O People of the Scriptures! Come to a word common to you and us that we worship none but Allah and that we associate nothing in worship with Him, and that none of us shall take others as Lords beside Allah. Then if they turn away, say: Bear witness that we are Muslims."

Muhammad, the Messenger of God[4]

In contrast to Khosrau II, who had been sent a similar letter earlier, the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius kept the letter and sought to find confirmation concerning what it contained. This is quite different to the treatment accorded to his letter to Khosrau II of the Sassinid Empire. According to Abdullah ibn Abbas, the latter was sent with Abdullah ibn Hudhafa al-Sahmi by way of the Governor of Bahrain.

"So, when Khosrau read the letter he tore it up. Saeed ibn al-Musaiyab said, 'The Prophet then invoked God to destroy and disperse Khosrau and his followers fully and with severity". (Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

The Sassinid Empire was to utterly dissolve almost immediately, first through the defeat by the Romans, and then

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2 That none has right to worship but God, and Muhammad is His Messenger.

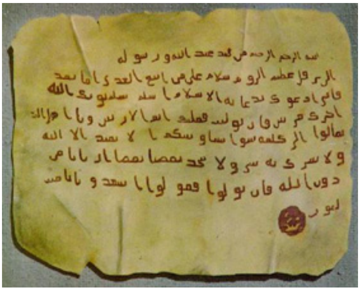
3 As well as his own sin of rejecting it.

4 This letter is preserved in some history books, and a plate of the original letter was included in Khan, Dr. Majid Ali (1998). Muhammad The Final Messenger. Islamic Book Service, New Delhi, 110002 (India). One of his letters to Christian rulers is preserved in Topkapi Museum, Istanbul.

by the onslaught of the new Muslim nation. The Byzantine Empire, too, while still under Heraclius, dissolved in Egypt, Palestine and Syria. However, unlike the Sassinid Empire, the Byzantine Empire continued on in various forms for another 800 years until Constantinople finally fell, and this may be because of the contrast in the way each of the letters was received.

The Reception

Heraclius Receives News of Muhammad



Ibn al-Natur was the Governor of Jerusalem for Heraclius, who was the head of the Christians of Greater Syria. Ibn al-Natur narrates that once, while he was in Jerusalem:

Heraclius got up in the morning in a sad mood. Some of the priests asked him why.

Being one who practiced astrology, Heraclius had been attempting to map out the future.

In reply to the enquiry, he said, “Last night I was looking at the stars, and I saw that a leader of those who practice circumcision had appeared (and would conqueror all before him). Who are they who practice circumcision?”

The priests replied, “Except the Jews nobody practices circumcision, and you needn’t be afraid of them; just issue orders to kill every Jew present in the country.”

While they were discussing it, a messenger sent by the King of Ghassan[5] to convey the news of the Messenger of God to Heraclius was brought in.

(This news may have been the actual letter from the Prophet)

Having heard the news, Heraclius ordered the priest check whether the messenger from Ghassan was circumcised. After having him physically examined, they reported that the man was circumcised. Heraclius then asked the messenger about the custom of the Arabs. The messenger replied, "Arabs also practice circumcision."

When he heard this, Heraclius said, "The reign of the Arabs has began and their kingdom is about to become manifest."[6]

The following story is taken from the narratives by the companions of the Prophet. The story was told by Abu Sufyan to Abdullah Ibn Abbas, who related it to others.[7] Ibn Abbas was a very devoted student to Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, and a well respected scholar of the Quran.

Abu Sufyan's Meeting with Heraclius Caesar

In 629CE, three years before the death of the Messenger of God, Heraclius re-conquered Jerusalem triumphantly bearing what was said to be the original cross venerated by the Christians, and which the Khosrau II had taken as booty

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5 Ghassan was vassal state of the Roman Empire in Greater Syria administered by an Arab king loyal to Byzantium.

6 This aspect of the story will be continued in the next article.

7 The stories in this article are as related by Abdullah ibn Abbas in Saheeh Bukhari.

15 years previously.[8] While resident there, the letter Muhammad had sent, perhaps a year earlier, came to his hand. When he read it, he enquired about the presence of someone from the author's people in the territory he controlled, and was told of Abu Sufyan's trade caravan from Mecca, which was trading nearby. He, with his companions, was summoned to the Emperor's court in Jerusalem, appearing before Heraclius who had his Byzantine Grandees around him.

The Questions Posed by Heraclius and Their Answers

Heraclius called for his interpreter so as to question them, commanding him to ask who amongst them was the closest in kinship to the man who claimed to be a prophet.

Abu Sufyan replied, "I am the nearest relative to him (in this group)."

Heraclius asked, "And what is the relationship between you and him?"

Abu Sufyan said, "He is my (distant) cousin on the spear side."[9]

Heraclius said, "Bring him closer!" and had Abu Sufyan's companions placed behind him, at his shoulders. Then he ordered his interpreter, "Tell his companions that I am going to question him about the man who claims to be a prophet, so if he tells a lie, immediately repudiate it as a lie."

"How is the lineage of this man among you?" the Roman Emperor continued.

8 Khosrau II, a Wikipedia article incorporating information from Heraclius and Khosrow II in the online Encyclopædia Britannica (2006).
9 "the son of my paternal great uncle."

“He is of noble descent.” Abu Sufyan replied.

Heraclius further enquired, “Has anybody amongst you ever previously claimed the same as he does?” “Was he prone to lying before he claimed what he has claimed?” “Was anybody among his ancestors a king?”

To each question Abu Sufyan could only answer, “No.”

“Do the highborn or the humble among his people listen to him?”

Abu Sufyan replied, “The powerless, rather than the highborn, follow him.”

He said, “Are they increasing or decreasing in number?”

“They are increasing,” was the reply.

He then asked, “Does anybody amongst those who embrace his religion turn away discontent and renounce it after a while.”

“No.”

Heraclius said, “Does he break his covenants?”

The caravan leader replied, **“No. We have a truce with him now, but we fear he may betray us.”**

The questioning relentlessly continued: **“Have you ever fought each other?”**

“Yes.”

“How do the battles turn out?”

“Sometimes he wins the battles and sometimes we win them.”

“What does he order you to do (when he preaches)?

“He tells us to worship God alone and not to worship anything along with Him, and to renounce the all the idols that our ancestors have taught us to worship. He

orders us to pray, give charity, be chaste, fulfill promises and discharge our trusts to kith and kin."

Abu Sufyan was to later admit that he would have lied about the Prophet if he hadn't been afraid of the shame of having his colleagues (listening behind him) spread reports that he was a liar. So he answered as truthfully as he could. He also mentioned the part that he had feared betrayal from Muhammad and those he led because it presented the best opportunity he had to slip in a negative statement against him.

The Emperor Assesses the Interrogation

After he had finished interrogating Abu Sufyan about the Prophet, Heraclius decided to tell him what he had learned from the interview. His interpreter conveyed his analysis.

He said: "I asked you about his lineage among you, and you stated that he was of sound lineage. Indeed, all the Messengers of God come from sound lineages among their respective peoples.

"Then I asked if anybody had claimed what he claims before him among your tribe, and your reply was that none had. If you had said others had made such a claim, I would have assumed he was following that which had been said before him.

"I further asked if you had found him a liar before he said what he said, and you said that you had not. I know that a person who does not lie about other men would never lie about God.

"And I asked you if any of his ancestors had been a king. If your reply had been an affirmative, I would have thought that the man was seeking to restore his ancestral kingdom.

"Then I enquired whether the highborn or the humble followed him, and you told me his followers were mainly humble people. Indeed, they are invariably the followers of Messengers.

"Then I asked you whether his followers were increasing or decreasing, and you informed me that they were increasing. And so it is with true faith until it is complete.

"I further asked you whether there was anybody who embraces the religion he teaches who turns away discontent and renounces it after a while. Your reply was in the negative, which is how true faith is, when the delight of it mixes completely with their hearts.

"And I asked you whether you fought one another, to which you replied affirmatively, adding that the fortunes of war were sometimes in his favor and sometimes in yours. So it is with all Messengers, but the final victory will be with him.

"I asked you whether he is ever treacherous, and you said he is not. So it is with all the Messengers; they never act treacherously.

"Then I asked you what he enjoins upon you in the religion he preaches. You stated that he orders you to worship God alone, and not associate any thing with Him, and not worship the idols of your ancestors. And that he enjoins you to pray and give charity, to be chaste, fulfill covenants and discharge trusts. And this is the description of what a prophet does."

Thus did The Byzantine Caesar acknowledge the prophethood of the Messenger of God.

Heraclius Invites His Subjects

The Public Reading of the Letter



After Heraclius had confirmed that he believed Muhammad to be a prophet, he said:

"I knew that he was going to appear, but I did not know that he would be from among you. If what you have said is true, he will rule the very the ground beneath my feet; if I knew I would definitely see him in person, I would undertake the journey to meet him; and if I were with him, I would wash his feet."

This is in keeping with the placement of this story after the ibn al-Natur's report of the attempt by Heraclius to foretell the future astrologically. It is apparent that he 'knew', or at least suspected, that a powerful prophet had arisen among the Arab people. It was at this stage that he asked for the letter he had received from the Messenger of God so as to read it aloud to the assembly.

"When Heraclius had finished his speech and had read the letter, there was a great hue and cry in the Royal Court, so the Meccans were ejected. Abu Sufyan wondered aloud to his companions, "The affairs of ibn abi-Kabsha[10] have become so prominent that even the King of the Bani-Asfar (the fair skinned ones) fears him."

10 The Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him.

Abu Sufyan later told the narrator[11] "I lay low, by God, and reserved, certain that the affairs of Muhammad would emerge triumphant, until God brought my heart to the point of embracing Islam."

Heraclius in Homs

Meanwhile, according to ibn al-Natur's narration, Heraclius had written a letter to a friend in Rome concerning the letter he had received[12] whose knowledge he trusted as comparable to his own. Then he left Jerusalem[13] for Homs (Emesa in Roman times) in Syria, where he awaited the reply.

"When he received the reply from his friend, he saw that the man agreed that the signs portended the appearance of a new leader, and that the leader was the expected prophet. On that, Heraclius invited all the Grandees of Byzantium to assemble in his palace at Homs.

"When his Grandees had assembled, he ordered that all the doors of his palace be closed. Then he came out and said, "O Byzantines! If success is your desire and if you seek right guidance and want your Empire to remain, then give a pledge of allegiance to the emerging Prophet!

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11 Ibn Abbas.

12 It is possible he sent the actual letter from the Prophet with his request to assess it, though this is not made explicit in the narration.

13 It is historically recorded that he in March 630CE restored the cross the Nestorians had removed from the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, which was several months after his meeting with Abu Sufyan. He would have left for Homs soon after that.

"On hearing this invitation, the Grandees of the Church ran towards the gates of the palace like a herd of wild asses, but found the doors closed. Heraclius, realizing their hatred towards Islam, lost hope that they would ever embrace Islam, and he ordered that they should be brought back to the audience room. After they returned, he said, "What I have just said was simply to test the strength of your conviction, and I have seen it.

"The people prostrated before him and became pleased with him, and Heraclius turned away from faith."

A legend has grown up around the events at Homs. It is said that Heraclius first suggested that his bishops embrace Islam, but when they refused, he suggested that the Empire pay tribute to the Prophet of Islam. When they refused this in turn, he suggested making peace with the Muslims and agreeing to a pact of non-belligerence. When this too was refused, he left Syria for Byzantium, and gave up all interest in preserving the Empire south and east of Antioch – never taking the field against the Muslim advance in person, and sending incompetent generals as the defenders of his Middle Eastern lands. What is certain is that he treated the letter and the claim to prophethood therein seriously, and he made every effort to sway his people before turning back.

The Heirloom

The historian, al-Suhayli was the source of two more stories associated with the letter to Heraclius, both of which ibn Hajar included in the commentary on the stories above.[14] He commented that al-Suhayli recalled hearing of a letter that

14 Fat-hal-Bari by Ibn Hajar al-Askalani.

was kept in a jeweled diamond case, which showed the high status of its owner, that had been left as an heirloom even until that day, and had reached the hands of the King of Franja.[15] His descendants thought that it had come into his possession at the time of the conquest of Toledo,[16] and the Commander of the Muslim Army, Abdul Malik bin Saad came to know of it through one of these descendants[17] in the 12th Century. Some of Abdul Malik's companions related that the Commander of the Muslim Army sat with the King of Franja[18], who took out the letter in its jeweled case. When Abdul Malik saw the treasured scroll he realized it was very ancient, and asked if he could kiss the venerable antiquity. However, the King of Franja refused to let him.

Al Suhayli further said that he had been told by more than one source that the jurist, Nuraddin ibn Saygh al-Dimashqi said that he had heard that Sayfuddin Flih al-Mansuri was sent with a gift by King al-Mansur Qalaun[19] to the King of Morocco,[20] who then sent the gift to the King of

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15 'Franja' is the Spanish word used for the coastal kingdom(s) of the Iberian Peninsula. In this story the Kings of Franja are from the Jiminez and Burgundy dynasties of Asturias, Galicia, Leon and Castile (which split off from Leon). Leon came into existence when the Kingdom of Asturias was split three ways in 910.See (http://www.tacitus.nu/historical-atlas/regents/iberian/leon.htm).

16 By Alfonso VI 1085CE, or 478H.

17 The Kings of Leon from the House of Burgundy

18 Though not named, this would probably have been Alfonso VII 'The Emperor' or Ferdinand II of Castile and Leon.

19 Possibly the Egyptian King from the Mamluk Dynasty, who ruled Egypt from 1278-90CE.

20 Very probably Abu Yusuf Yaqub from the Merinid Dynasty, who reigned from 1259-86CE.

Franja[21] in exchange for an unmentioned favor, which was granted. The King of Franja invited the messenger to stay in his Kingdom for a while, but he turned the offer down. Before he left, however, the King asked Sayfuddin if he would like to see a valuable object which may have been of interest to him (as a Muslim). Then he had a chest brought out full of compartments, each compartment filled with treasures.

From one of the compartments he took out a long, thin diamond encrusted box (rather like a pencil case). He opened it and took out a scroll. The ancient paper of the scroll was damaged and the writing on it somewhat faded, but most of the body had been preserved by dint of sandwiching it between two silk cloths when rolling it for storage. The King of Franja said: "This is the letter that my ancestor, Caesar, received from your Prophet, which has been handed down to me as an heirloom. Our ancestor left behind a will that his descendents should keep this heirloom if they wished their rule of the Kingdom to last. With it we are strongly protected as long as we respect the letter and keep it hidden. So has the Kingdom come down to us."[22]

Exactly how valid the claim that the Kingdom of Heraclius (who had officially been Caesar of the entire Roman

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21 Most likely, Alfonso X, King of Castile and Leon (1252-84CE). He had the title Rex Romanorum (the King of Rome – See: http://www.masterliness.com/s/Rex.Romanorum.htm), to which he was elected, as his family was one who could claim descent from Charlemagne.See:(http://www.masterliness.com/a/Alfonso.X.of.Castile.htm).

22 Alfonso VII, his forefather, had been known as 'The Emperor' because traditionally the Kings of Leon and Asturias, being descendents of the Visigoth Holy Roman Empire, were known as pretenders to the Empire of Iberia.

Empire) had descended to him is questionable, as the Byzantine Empire still existed in the east, and would continue for a further 150 years. However, Heraclius could have sent the letter to Rome, as mentioned earlier, and the letter could have been kept there and passed down into the Visigoth line of Emperors when Charlemagne was crowned Emperor in Rome by Pope Leo III in 800CE.

We cannot categorically say that the letter actually did survive the centuries, though these stories point to that possibility. One of the Prophet's letters still exists on its original parchment in Topkapi museum.

Conclusion

Many may think that Heraclius secretly became Muslim, for he sought to establish whether Muhammad's prophetic claim was true by considering his background, motivations, and effects on his people; his character, accomplishments and message. Judging from his reply to Abu Sufyan and the invitation to his pillars of society in Homs, he seems to have been convinced that Muhammad was genuine. Perhaps his heart was swayed towards the monotheism expressed by Muhammad in his letter, and he certainly tried to follow his advice to avoid the sin of misguiding those he ruled. His subjects, however, proved too strong in their rejection, and he capitulated to their pressure, unable to submit to this new faith because he feared the rebellion of the people. For this reason, like the uncle of the Prophet, Abu Talib, who believed that Muhammad was a prophet and guarded him throughout his latter life until death but still did not submit to Islam due to the shame brought on by his peers, Heraclius died as a disbeliever in Islam and the Prophet of God.